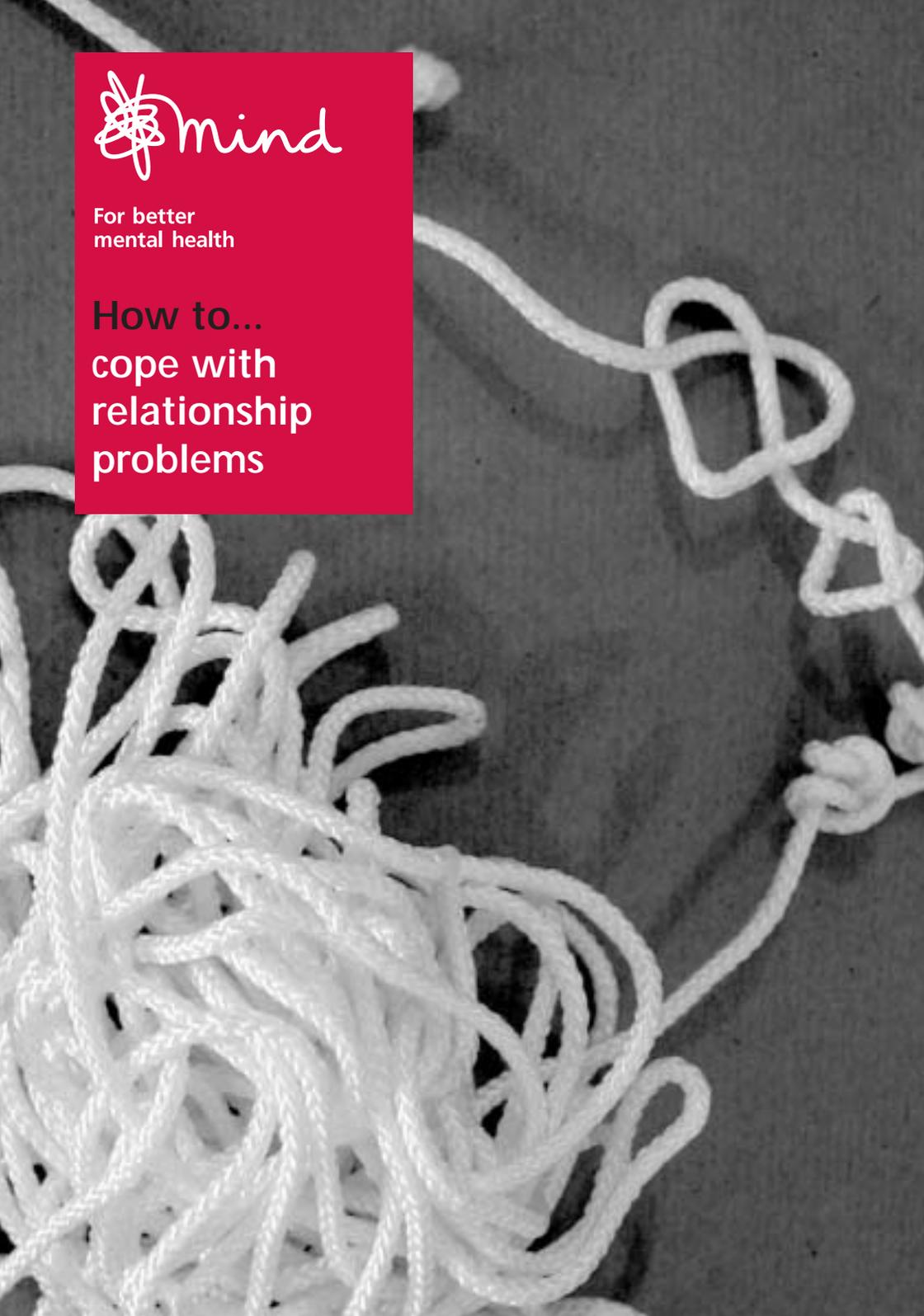




For better  
mental health

**How to...**  
**cope with**  
**relationship**  
**problems**



# How to... cope with relationship problems

“I felt angry and bitter that my husband was running out on me. Friends were a great support, while work gave my day structure and took my mind off my problems. But it was also sheer determination that got me through. I had to prove to myself, and my ex-husband, that I could cope and provide stability for my children. My job in a hospital has given me back my self-esteem. I have status that I didn't have before and I have gained the respect of many people.”

**This booklet looks at some of the problems that can undermine relationships. It tells you where to find the help and support you need, either to mend the relationship or to move on successfully.**



## What can cause relationship problems?

Relationship problems may be triggered by an unexpected event, like the loss of a job, illness or the death of a child. But any major life changes, even some we may have chosen ourselves, such as moving house, having a baby or inviting an elderly parent to live with us, can place huge pressures on a relationship. In some ways, these everyday events are easier to overlook, because we think that everyone experiences them. So we try to cope, ignoring the signs of stress.

Many people are living in highly stressful relationships, with partners who are abusive or alcoholic, who have long-term illness, are unemployed, or who are having affairs. You may be doing your best to cope, to carry on as normal, and may even be admired for doing so.

Whatever the problem, the first step towards dealing with it is acknowledging it. Here are some of the most common sources of stress, and suggested ways of coping with them, which may save your relationship. (For more information, see *Useful organisations*, on p. 12, and *Further reading*, on p. 14.)

### **Babies and young children**

New babies bring pleasure and joy. But they also bring broken nights and change the balance of your relationship. Sometimes a mother is so involved with her baby that her partner feels excluded and jealous. Many women also go off sex for a period after giving birth. Second babies bring jealousy from the first-born, and generally more demands. A partner who is feeling neglected may then withdraw and stop communicating, or spend more time at work.

It's essential that you have time alone together, away from the children. You might book a babysitter and go out for the evening, or leave the children with friends for part of the weekend. The main carer is also likely to be pretty desperate for time away from children, alone or with friends, on a regular basis. Try to work things out between you so that you are both getting your needs met. This can relieve a lot of the pressure on your relationship.

### **Step-children**

It's quite common to feel jealous of, and competitive with, your partner's child or children, perhaps almost feeling like another child yourself. These are very uncomfortable feelings. Remember that your partner has chosen to live with you and that you have an adult-to-adult relationship that is quite different from the parent-child relationship. Try to establish your own relationship with the child, for example by finding an enjoyable activity that you can do together without your partner.

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Some step-children may seem deliberately hostile to a step-parent. They may feel that aggression is their only source of power in this situation, and will express it openly or by silence and withdrawal. You will need to talk to your partner to get support, but be careful to talk about your feelings and not to criticise the children.

## Starting an affair

Many of us fall in love and start a relationship hoping that it's going to meet all our needs and that we will live happily ever after. When we run into problems, whether at home or at work, it's easy to blame the relationship and think we are with the wrong person. At this point, it may be tempting to give up on the relationship or start an affair with somebody else.

Having an affair does not necessarily mean the end of the relationship. The impulse to have an affair is often a symptom of underlying problems between the two of you. The third party might be the right person, but it's just as likely that you will take the same problems with you into that new relationship.

To tackle this dilemma, it's crucial that you start listening to each other's disappointments and needs, and for this you may find that you need professional help, from a relationship counsellor, for instance.

## Sex

Although sexual difficulties are often a symptom of other problems, in some relationships they are the basis of the difficulty. People often feel shy or ashamed of acknowledging them, but many problems are solvable with expert help. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12.)

### Unemployment and redundancy

Redundancy is usually sudden and shocking. Whatever the reason, it's likely to dent someone's self-esteem and so make them feel bad-tempered and moody, as well as anxious. At the same time, your partner may start to feel resentful if they are now the sole breadwinner. This may be aggravated if, quite understandably, the jobless person is keeping busy by seeing friends or taking up other pastimes. In this situation, it's a good idea to talk about rebalancing things, so that the working partner gets more support and doesn't have to do all the domestic chores.

If neither of you works, you're both likely to get anxious and, unless you express these feelings, tense, angry or simply withdrawn. Long-term unemployment, whether it's you, your partner or a grown-up child, is draining for the whole family. The unemployed person will often feel inadequate and powerless and this may mean that they withdraw sexually. They may also feel sad, depressed, or humiliated.

Jobcentre Plus has now replaced the old Employment Service, and should advise, encourage and help people to find work. It may also help with benefits. It's possible to talk to someone face to face at a local office, to write in, phone, or access the website. There are various new schemes targeted at particular sections of society, such as the New Deal for Disabled People. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12, for more information.)

### Long-standing illness

This puts an enormous strain on any partnership. Apart from the extra work involved, the well partner will often have unwelcome feelings like resentment, hatred or jealousy. It's essential that you have a place to air feelings, so that they don't get in the way of your caring or damage your own health and wellbeing.

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Bottling them up will only increase the pressure on the relationship. It can also take the pressure off if the ill partner has a place to talk. There are organisations that support people with specific diseases and those caring for them. Your hospital or social worker should have details of groups dealing with your partner's illness.

## Alcoholism

You may have knowingly teamed up with a drinker, or your partner may begin drinking later in your relationship. One of the hardest things about living with an alcoholic is their mood swings. They may be quite abusive, even violent, when drunk, but charming when sober; affectionate and attentive when they're drinking, but very withdrawn again when they stop. And the expense of drinking may cause money problems. Your partner's alcoholism need not lead to the end of your relationship, if you are both willing to get help.

## Money problems

Shortage of money can produce a lot of anxiety and fear, and can easily become the main focus of a relationship. Share your feelings as much as you can, rather than withdrawing in panic or blaming your partner for not earning enough. You could contact the National Debtline or go together to your local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). All CAB staff are trained to offer help with debt and redundancy problems. They can help you to check whether you are getting all the benefits you are entitled to, and discuss whether other options are available.

Many money problems are actually power struggles being played out through money. If this is what is happening with you, a counsellor or therapist is probably your best source of help. (See p. 8, *Useful organisations*, on p. 12, and *Further reading*, on p. 14, for more information.)

### **Physical violence and emotional abuse**

This is probably one of the most difficult situations to deal with, but there is increasing support available for both partners, which could save the relationship. The physical violence doesn't have to be frequent to make you a victim.

More common, and perhaps even more frightening and undermining, is the emotional abuse. Slamming doors and threats like, 'Don't you ever do that again' evoke a constant fear of violence. You may begin to adapt your behaviour so that you don't provoke your partner. You may get confused because your partner becomes loving after an attack, telling you it wasn't that bad, that you should forget about it, perhaps even pretending that it didn't happen, so that you begin to doubt your own experience.

Your partner may be in the habit of humiliating you in front of your friends, or making constant critical remarks about what you do and how you look. This kind of verbal abuse may happen again and again, and can be devastating over time.

Emotional abuse may also take the form of silent withdrawal. In this situation most people start to feel ugly, worthless, ashamed, unloved and unlovable. You may start to move away from your friends and become withdrawn at work. As your self-esteem plummets, you may feel increasingly dependent for friendship and love on the very person who is abusing you.

Partners may resort to violence in response to their own feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, loneliness and depression. The patterns involved in a violent and abusive relationship usually run very deep and you will need professional help if you are to save your relationship. Acknowledging what is going on is an important first step. You might want to start by talking to a friend.

# How to... cope with relationship problems



## How do I find someone experienced to talk to?

If you want to talk to someone, but don't feel ready to talk face to face, then you could start by ringing one of the helplines. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12.)

### Counselling and psychotherapy

At this point in your relationship, talking to an independent third party, on a strictly confidential basis, can be enormously helpful. You may have a friend who has been to see a counsellor or therapist and can give you a personal recommendation, or your GP may be able to refer you to someone.

Alternatively, contact one of the organisations, such as Relate. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12.) Some local projects offer help to both male and female victims of domestic violence. Details of these organisations should be in your phone book. Alternatively, contact the Mindinfo line. (See also Mind's booklet *Understanding talking treatments*, under *Further reading*, on p. 14.)



## What do I do when I know it's over?

Even if you have decided your relationship is over, it can be very difficult to leave, especially if it's an abusive one. However bad it is, it's familiar and we are all scared of the unknown.

You might be afraid of being lonely, and that you will never have another relationship. If you have been married a long time, you may feel ashamed and not want friends and neighbours to know.

If you have been financially supported by your partner, or shared bills, you will probably have anxieties about money. There may also be a period of doubting, when you think this relationship may be as good as any other, and that 'everyone has problems'.

### Getting help

Once you have made the decision, you will find your separation goes more smoothly if you have help. Most conflicts at the end of a relationship centre on housing, and possessions, money and children. A lot of power struggles get played out in these areas, and discussions tend to get very emotional. Consider seeing a counsellor to get some support during this stressful period. Another option is to go to a local legal advice centre, which should have a free surgery at least once a week. They can refer you to a solicitor specialising in conciliation. If you have any difficulty getting access to either of these, a CAB should be able to help you. They can also advise you about your legal rights, and various options available for dealing with any financial or housing problems. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12, for more information.)

If you are leaving a violent relationship and are living with the threat of being hit, you are deemed to be 'homeless'. However, you will not necessarily be regarded as being in priority need of rehousing, unless you are pregnant or have children.

It's worth contacting your local housing department to discuss the situation. If you need information about emergency shelters, see *Useful organisations*, on p. 12, or contact Mind<sup>in</sup>foline or the Mind website.

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## How will separating affect the children?

One danger after separation is that parents use children as pawns, playing out their own unresolved feelings of anger and hurt. This might be by withholding maintenance. Or you may want to exclude your ex-partner, who doesn't have custody, from parents' evenings, or prevent them from coming to your home. These power struggles are damaging for the child and should be dealt with privately, between you and your partner. A counsellor or conciliation lawyer could help you with this.

### Behaviour patterns to avoid

Children and parents tend to react to separation in certain patterns. Being aware of these can help you to deal with them. One pattern is that the child and the parent they live with become much too dependent on each other (especially if it's just the two of them). Sometimes, if there are a number of children, the parent opts out and the children evolve a system amongst themselves, so that an older child may take on the role of parent. Another trap is for the parent to overcompensate, out of guilt, and feel compelled to do everything for the children to make up for what has happened. She or he may be too lax or too anxious about setting limits because of this. There is also a danger that the other parent may stop seeing their children because of the pain it involves.

### Children in trouble

Too frequently, a child starts extreme acting-out, either with abusive behaviour towards the parent or by bullying behaviour or withdrawal at school. A danger here is that the behaviour may be excused and tolerated because the child has had such a rough time. There are now many voluntary organisations offering counselling for children, and it may also be available through the school. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12.)

## How do I move on?

The first step is to acknowledge how you are feeling. If you have been left, you will probably be feeling abandoned and negative about yourself. You may fear that you'll never have another relationship and no-one will ever love you again. These feelings give way to anger, which is a natural and healthy response to being left. Expressing it is one of the best ways of raising your self-esteem and not sinking into depression. Even if you feel relieved or have chosen to end the relationship, you are still likely to go through a grieving process.

If you have been in an abusive relationship, you will need to work on freeing yourself from repeating the pattern. You may find counselling or psychotherapy a useful tool. (See *Understanding talking treatments*, details under *Further reading*, on p. 14.)

### Rediscovering your identity

If you have just ended a long-term relationship you may feel quite lost, asking yourself, 'Who am I now I'm not in a relationship?' If you are a woman leaving a marriage, you may find yourself dropped by one-time friends who see you as a threat. Talking to people in your own situation can be very helpful. This is also a good time to look back at what was positive or nurturing and what was negative and undermining in your relationship. This can give you more of a sense of self and help you to move on. You might also review your life generally. Which friendships or activities are still satisfying? How do you feel about your work?

Two common responses to ending a long-term relationship are to rush straight into another, or close off from the possibility of intimacy. Whether or not you follow these impulses, this is a time when it's important to focus on yourself (see *Further reading*, on p. 14, for the Mind booklets that can help.)



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## Useful organisations

### Al-Anon Family Groups

61 Great Dover Street, London SE1 4YF  
tel. 020 7403 0888, web: [www.al-anon.org.uk](http://www.al-anon.org.uk)  
Supports partners and family members of problem drinkers

### British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

BACP House, 35–37 Albert Street, Rugby CV21 2SG  
tel. 0870 443 5252, web: [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)  
See website or send A5 SAE for details of local practitioners

### British Association for Sexual and Relationship Therapy

PO Box 13686, London SW20 9ZH  
tel./fax: 020 8543 2707, web: [www.basrt.org.uk](http://www.basrt.org.uk)  
Provides lists of sexual and relationship therapists and clinics

### Citizens Advice

115–123 Pentonville Road, London N1 9LZ  
tel. 020 7833 2181, web: [www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)  
information online: [www.adviceguide.org.uk](http://www.adviceguide.org.uk)  
National office for the network of Citizens Advice Bureaux

### Family Contact Line

30 Church Street, Altrincham WA14 4DSW  
tel. 0161 941 4011  
Helpline for marital and relationship problems

### Marriage Care

1 Blythe Mews, Blythe Road, London W14 0NW  
tel. 020 7371 1341, web: [www.marriagecare.org.uk](http://www.marriagecare.org.uk)  
For people with marriage or relationship difficulties

### **Mindinfo**

tel. 0845 766 0163

Mind's helpline and information service

### **National Debtline**

The Arch, 48–52 Floodgate Street, Digbeth, Birmingham B5 5SL

tel. 0808 808 4000, web: [www.nationaldebtline.co.uk](http://www.nationaldebtline.co.uk)

For advice about debt

### **National Family Mediation**

Alexander House, Telephone Avenue, Bristol BS1 4BS

tel. 0117 904 2825, web: [www.nfm.u-net.com](http://www.nfm.u-net.com)

Helps couples make decisions about how to separate

### **Parentline Plus**

Highgate Studios, 53–57 Highgate Road, London NW5 1TL

helpline: 0808 800 2222, web: [www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

Information and support to anyone parenting a child

### **Relate**

Herbert Gray College, Little Church Street, Rugby CV21 3AP

tel. 0845 456 1310, web: [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

Offers counselling for adults with relationship difficulties

### **Women's Aid**

PO Box 391, Bristol BS99 7WS

helpline: 0845 702 3468, web: [womensaid.org.uk](http://womensaid.org.uk)

National domestic violence charity

### **Website:**

[www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk](http://www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk)

# How to... cope with relationship problems

## Further reading

- The anger control workbook: simple and innovative techniques for managing anger and developing healthier ways of relating* M. McKay, P. Rogers (New Harbinger Press 2000) £13.99
- The assertiveness workbook: how to express your ideas and stand up for yourself at work and in relationships* R. J. Paterson (New Harbinger Press 2000) £12.99
- How to accept yourself* Dr W. Dryden (Sheldon Press 1999) £6.99
- How to assert yourself* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope as a carer* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to cope with doubts about your sexual identity* (Mind 1999) £1
- How to cope with loneliness* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to deal with anger* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to improve your mental wellbeing* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to increase your self-esteem* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to look after yourself* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to parent when you're in a crisis* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to restrain your violent impulses* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to survive family life* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to survive midlife crisis* (Mind 2002) £1
- Managing anger: dealing positively with hurt and frustration* G. Lindenfield (Thorsons 2000) £7.99
- Overcoming anger and irritability* W. Davies (Robinson 2000) £7.99
- Parenting well when you're depressed: a complete resource for maintaining a healthy family* J. Nicholson, A. D. Henry, J. C. Clayfield (New Harbinger 2001) £13.99
- Postnatal depression: facing the paradox of loss, happiness and motherhood* P. Nicholson (Wiley 2001) £8.99
- Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding bereavement* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding childhood distress* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding depression* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding talking treatments* (Mind 2002) £1

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- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education.

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:  
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Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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